

Our Principles

The Seven Principles

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The Six Sources

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in

harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennoble our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

Note: The above seven principles and six sources are not like creeds which too often survive long after they may be relevant. As many beliefs become inaccurate as human knowledge and experience expands, the UUA Bylaws include a provision for a study and review process of these principles not less than every 15 years. Such a review and study process was launched in May, 2006. Any changes require approval by 2/3 vote of representatives from all UU congregations at an annual General Assembly.

Behavioral Covenants in Congregations

(Edited from: Gilbert R. Rendle. Behavioral Covenants in Congregations. Maryland: Alban Institute. 1999)

By Qiyamah A. Rahman,
TJ District Executive

The practice of loving, civil behavior in our congregations is a central mark of our Unitarian Universalist principles and purposes. Yet, there are times when we find ourselves losing sight of "right relations." It is these times that we are in need of behavior covenants in our congregations. Many of our lay leaders in the TJD are requesting covenant retreats and consultations to harmonize their relations and promote their visions and missions. In my role as District Executive I have learned that it is better to be proactive and have covenants already in place than to wait until you are in the throes of conflict and not have them. The following information is offered as our TJ District and congregations navigate change during these challenging times. A behavioral covenant is an effective way to establish some "ground rules" to ensure right relations and to keep a steady course through times of change and chaos, diverse opinions and passionate discussions. A behavioral covenant is a "written document developed by leaders, agreed to and owned by its creators, and practiced on a daily basis as a spiritual discipline.

Gil Rendle, author of *Behavioral Covenants*, believes that practicing the discipline described by the behavioral covenant is an act of faith, because practicing such helpful and healthy behaviors allows us to act on our stated beliefs and values. Our litigious society pursues the use of contracts and rules to bind agreements and therefore seeks judgment decrees through the court when they are broken. As UUs we seek to covenant, that is, promise how we will be in community with one another. Our promises are vows made with the intention of keeping them. So unlike a legal ruling where we often seek compensation for a breached contract, Rendle reminds us that what we seek as our desired outcome is, "understanding and recommitment." We want to know the following:
"What went wrong? What are we having trouble with?
How do we try again?"

Because covenants are promises to follow and not rules prescribing punishment, they seek more to identify and negotiate changes in our behavior, not in our personalities or our values since those are often non-negotiable. Thus, covenants should describe behaviors, not personality changes. So while we cannot change the personality of individuals, as much as we might want to, we can help one another to be faithful, to seek to create environments in which the possibilities of reconciliation are increased.

Ways to Use Behavioral Covenants

Covenants are an exciting tool for UUs to ground us in the sacred work of building community. Covenants provide some basic ground rules for right relations and some structure when things become contentious as they often times do.

Once you have developed your covenant(s) you want to build in implementation. Here are some suggestions:

- Read your developed covenant at the beginning of board meetings to reinforce the "new" behavior that has been agreed upon and to breath life into your covenant.
- Integrate your covenant into your process observing at the conclusion of board meetings using the following discussion questions: "How are we doing with the covenant?" Or "How do you think we as a board are doing with our covenant?" Or "Which of our covenant promises do you think we are struggling with the most?" May our work be joyful and light as we partner on this journey to bring Unitarianism Universalism to the world.

Warmest regards, Qiyamah A. Rahman

Developing a Behavioral Covenant One Step Farther

Connie Goodbread

1. Brainstorm "Words that make us feel safe"
2. Discuss "Why do we need to feel safe?"

3. Write a behavioral covenant. This first one would be a board covenant. So we would begin with leadership.

Example: We will begin on time.

We will honor leadership.

I will speak for myself during the meeting.

I will listen respectfully.

I will answer carefully.

When we come to a decision we will speak with one voice.

We will act for the common good.

We will end on time.

This one could be a congregational behavioral covenant.

Or I promise to honor our leaders.

Use "I" statements,

Honor the right of others,

Uphold our Unitarian Universalist principles

And support my congregation with my time talents

and treasures.

4. Say these covenants out loud to each other, often.
5. Have safety policies in place in case something dangerous happens.
6. After some time is spent with the behavioral covenant hold several congregational meeting to rewrite the covenant into a meaningful covenant.
7. Give all of the ideas to a wordsmith who will write them into a poem of great value.
8. After it is written let everyone hear the words and give the congregation an opportunity to make suggestions.
9. Wordsmith reworks and presents the covenant to the congregation. Tweak during the meeting if necessary. See Meaningful Covenants.
10. Say it out loud and often.
11. Hold one another to these words.
12. When the covenant is broken call one another back to it.
13. If an individual is harmful to the community follow the safety policy.
14. Revisit the covenant often to make sure these are the promises you wish to make to each other and to include new members is the process and the promise.

**Covenant Group Start-up Procedure:
A Guideline for Religious Leaders**
Based on *A Covenant Group Source Book*,
published by The Center for Community Values

The following are suggestions which can be adapted to a congregation's particular situation.

1. Introduce the covenant group concept to the congregation with a sermon or other presentation by the minister, covenant group committee, and/or guest speaker. Covenant groups are a way of enhancing the congregation's ministry to members, potential members, and to the larger world, offering opportunities for growth, caring and connection. (See *A Covenant Group Source Book* for more complete description.) Existing groups within the congregation (e. g., women's group, men's group, book study group) can go on as they are, and should not be urged to conform to this new model.

2. Begin by recruiting covenant group facilitators based on their potential facilitation skills (see *A Covenant Group Source Book*, p. 9). Let candidates know of the one-year commitment which will be asked of those who become facilitators. Characteristics of an effective facilitator include:

- Empathy
- Sensitivity to group dynamics
- Maturity
- Regard for others
- Openness
- Flexibility
- Self-assurance
- Absence of self-preoccupation
- Good communication skills
- Commitment to the larger institution to which the groups belong

3. Organize a start-up group for facilitators. In these groups candidates learn facilitation skills and become familiar with the covenant group model by participating in and intentionally reflecting together upon the covenant group experience. Content of the start-up group meetings may include listening skills, building shared leadership, dividing groups, dealing with difficult people, avoiding cliquishness, etc.

4. After the candidates have participated in the start-up group for 4 weeks (including participation in a group project), at the fifth meeting candidates may be asked to reflect upon their experience thus far and to decide whether to become covenant group facilitators. Clarify with the candidates their responsibilities and commitments as facilitators.

Facilitators are committed to the covenant group process and are mindful of the difference between covenant groups and group therapy, encounter groups and self-help groups.

Facilitators are committed to helping the group accomplish its purpose rather than promoting their own agendas.

Facilitators are committed to establishing and maintaining appropriate balance of inward reflection and outward focus.

Responsibilities of facilitators include:

- Helping the group to develop & maintain ground rules
- Keeping the group on track
- Modeling facilitation skills
- Being aware of group dynamics
- Maintaining shared leadership
- Encouraging participation by all
- Identifying potential co-facilitator
- Paying attention to their group members' pastoral care needs, passing on information to the congregation's religious leader as appropriate

5. Explore with each facilitator what his or her group's initial focus might be. Some groups begin with a clear focus as initially established by the facilitator, and others begin meeting and then collectively decide on their group's focus. Covenant groups continue indefinitely, growing together and exploring different aspects of the group focus or collectively deciding to move together in a new direction. Covenant Groups can be affinity-based, interest-based, or activity-based. Groups begin with the understanding that the group will collectively decide upon topics and activities to be pursued.

Affinity-based groups might include:

- Young adults
- Moms of pre-schoolers
- Home-schooling parents
- Men's group
- Women's group
- Interest-based groups might include:
 - Simple living
 - Science and religion
 - Bible study
 - Spiritual exploration
- Activity-based groups might include:
 - Quilting circle
 - Gardening group

6. Help facilitators decide when and where their groups will initially meet. Some groups may meet at the congregation's facility; at the home of the facilitator or other group member; or rotate among group members' homes. Time and place of subsequent meetings will be collectively decided by the group. Groups should meet at least once a month.

7. Work with facilitators to coordinate registration process. Congregation members and visitors are invited to join the group of their choice. Registration is free and open. Facilitators may also recruit members for the group. Initial registration should be limited to a total of 10 persons per group. If more than 10 persons wish to sign up for a particular topic, additional groups can form and a facilitator should be trained for the group. After the facilitators' start-up group is finished, individual covenant groups begin meeting regularly. Over time, groups grow and seed new groups (see *A Covenant Group Source Book*, p. 8).

8. Establish ongoing facilitators' meetings. Facilitators continue to meet as a group with the religious leader on a regular basis (at least once a month) for ongoing support and training. Facilitators will be expected to be sensitive to the privacy needs of members of their groups when speaking generally about the challenges they may encounter. Situations that indicate the need for professional intervention will be discussed with the religious leader privately.

9. Remind facilitators to identify potential co-facilitators within their groups and to discuss such nominations with the religious leader or covenant group committee. Co-facilitators will eventually become facilitators of newly seeded groups.

10. Encourage group growth and division. Groups grow by recruitment (by facilitators or group members) and by referral (by the religious leader or covenant group committee) until they reach a maximum of 12 members. Groups then divide in order to accommodate continued growth.

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Elements of Small Group Ministry

Six Necessary, Defining Elements

- **Size.** The ideal covenant group size is eight to ten people. The group should have at least three or four people plus the facilitator and never more than twelve, including the facilitator.
- **Frequency of meetings.** The group should meet at least once a month and may meet twice a month or even weekly in someone's home or at church (if a quiet, private, living room-like setting is regularly available).
- **Format.** The format must combine worshipful and/or centering readings or rituals and personal check-in periods at the start and at the end. (See the recommended format below.)
- **Facilitators.** A facilitator is a woman or man who has been chosen and trained by the minister(s) (or in societies with no minister, by someone chosen by a small steering committee). The minister (or designated leader) then facilitates a covenant group for facilitators so that the training is ongoing and shared.
- **Empty Chair.** Always keep at least one chair empty, to symbolize those not yet reached who need us and to suggest the expectation that a new group will be "born from" this group when membership gets to ten or so.
- **Covenants.** During the second meeting, agree on a behavioral covenant-on how members wish to be with each other. Later, agree on at least one service to perform for the church each year. Twice a year, find a way of doing, as a group, something beneficial in the larger community.

The Every-Meeting Format

- **An opening reading** from a Unitarian Universalist source (our hymn book contains enough material to sustain a covenant group for many, many months).
- **A check-in period** during which each person is asked to briefly state his or her answer to a question such as, What's on your mind today? What do you need to leave behind for a couple of hours in order to be fully present here?
- **A time for the focus or purpose of the meeting.** The topic or activity can be whatever the group prefers, so long as it is consistent with our Purposes and Principles and the mission of the sponsoring congregation. The focus should be more on sharing than on debating.
- **The closing check-out.** The facilitator asks each person for a word or phrase that says something about how she or he is feeling as the meeting draws to an end.
- **A closing reading.** Again, it should be from a standard Unitarian Universalist source.

Excerpted from *The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry: Saving the World Ten at a Time* by Robert L. Hill. Other resources are available at www.smallgroupministry.net.

FACILITATOR TIPS FOR THE GROWTH OF GREAT SMALL GROUPS

Compiled by Peter Bowden (version 4.03)

Encourage open and honest communication

Encourage people to share views and feelings regardless of how outlandish, unexpected, and/or fleeting they may seem. Be explicit. Tell people that your group is a place where it is okay to do this. Personal and/or spiritual growth requires personal honesty. A group with a culture of personal honesty and open expression is a gift!

Create an affirming environment

We come together in our small groups not because we think or feel the same way, but because we have a shared humanity. Remember to affirm or praise the open and honest sharing, not necessarily the content of that sharing. You will necessarily not agree with everything that is said. But that isn't the point, is it?

Give it time

There is almost always something deeper brewing, percolating in their minds and hearts. Don't be too hasty in moving a conversation forward or elsewhere! After a question is asked or an idea put forth, it will often take a good 7 seconds (a very long time for facilitators) before people respond. After the first responses you can repeat the question and give another chance to respond. If there are no responses move on.

Dynamic participation

Give it time, but keep it moving. Groups are more interesting when conversation moves around the room, back and forth, and this way and that. Avoid letting one person dominate the conversation and extended exchanges between two people. Simply recognize if someone else has a related story, experience or idea and include them in the conversation. If a debate emerges between two people you can acknowledge it as something that is very interesting and worthy of their getting together to discuss over coffee!

Pay attention to faces and body language

Frowns, smiles, droopy eye lids, active twitching extremities, open mouths, leaning forward and back, closed or open arms — these are all non verbal forms of communication letting you know how people are doing. These cues let you know if someone is losing interest, wants to speak, needs to use the rest room, is frustrated, sad, and so on.

Speaking out of silence

Your group is not a discussion or support group. It is a Unitarian Universalist small ministry group where individuals are encouraged to learn, share, explore, and reflect in ways that promote personal, spiritual and/or intellectual growth. One thing that distinguishes these groups from discussion groups is the time that is given to silence and opportunities for reflection. Your group will have a more mindful, sacred or spiritual tone if silence is treated as a positive and welcome thing. Encourage a culture of "speaking out of silence" as a way by asking people to allow several breaths between responses. This

gives time for everyone to reflection what the last person said. This also inhibits judgmental comments” and debates.

Default back to the group

As a facilitator, especially before you reach a point where group facilitation is shared, people will default to you. They will look at you when conversation slows down or when they are ready to speak after a designated time of reflection. Members may direct difficult questions to you. Remember that your role as a leader does not call on you to be an all-knowing expert! Use a little UU judo and throw questions back to the group. After a time of reflection, ask if people are ready to share. If not, then say you’ll take another few minutes to reflect. If someone asks a really challenging question, sometimes it may be good to ask for his or her response to the question first. Often contrary opinions are communicated as questions. When in doubt, ask the group!

Have a fluid agenda

If something critical comes up, you may need to set aside the plan you had for the group. Check with the group. A story: Once upon a time a minister was so attached to the planned sermon that he/she didn’t take into account that no one wanted to hear it. Why? It was just after the 9/11/2001 terrorist attack. I guarantee she/he said “oops” within minutes of the service ending. Our groups have a purpose. One is being there when the world challenges us. Be mindful of the needs of the group. Again, if you are not sure if you should switch gears, check with the group.

Keep it fresh

Pay attention to the tone of your group. After a period of time groups need a breath of fresh air, they need change. This may be a change of venue, adding some new people, having people ready to lead leave to form their own groups, doing a service project together, planning a fun social outing with or without friends and partners, or something else all together. In the end, the best groups result in strong relationships, personal growth, and connections to the larger community, and have a certain spark to them. If the spark fades it may be time for some kind of change.

Questions make the group

I like to think of questions as roads. They lead between topics, serving to invite new ideas, stories and experiences into the group. Yes and no questions are potentially off ramps. They can take you off the super highway and leave you in the middle of nowhere with no gas. Open-ended questions that ask how and why and invite sharing of personal experience are like super highways and complex rotaries. They lead in many directions and do not assume a single destination. Watch out for questions that are fishing for a specific answer. That’s a one-way road!

Experiment. Have Fun with your group

The beauty of small group ministry is that it allows for all kinds of groups to form within a well established, stable, and agreed upon structure. There are basic elements common to all the groups in your congregation. Beyond the covenant between the group members and the congregation, there are few rules. How UU is that? Get excited. Be visionary.

Just check with your group and/or mentor, coach or minister before you do anything too crazy. If you discover that there is a desire for a kind of group that is significantly different from a small group ministry model, talk to leaders about it. Maybe there is a need for a new program at the church. If you have any doubt about whether something is appropriate, ask.